

Reviews

Barry Cunliffe, *On the Ocean. The Mediterranean and the Atlantic from Prehistory to AD 1500*, Oxford: University Press, 2017, vii + 631 p., 220 illustrations, 114 maps, ISBN 978-0-19-875789-4.

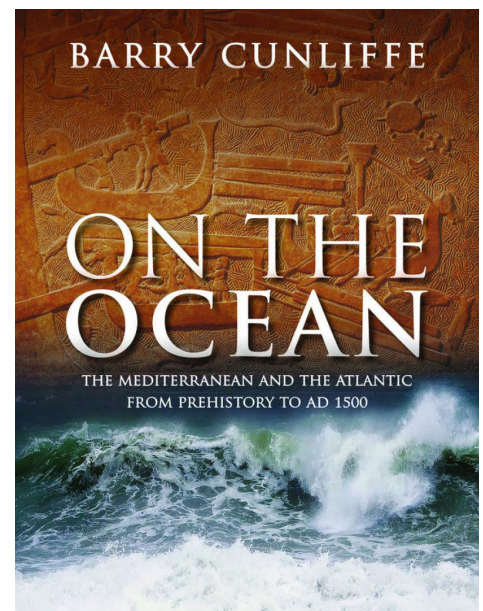
Sir Barrington Cunliffe, renowned archaeologist and historian, taught European Archaeology courses at the Oxford University between 1972 and 2007, now being an Emeritus Professor of the highly regarded university. His research interests at that time revolved around the relationship between the Mediterranean world and the “barbaric” Europe, especially in the first millennium BC and early first millennium AD (aspects already attributable to the subject of the present book). His first excavations and publications focused on Roman Britain, after which he expanded his interests to Iron Age Britain and, eventually, to the Celtic world. His first synthesis on these traditionally dichotomous historical narratives appeared in 1988 in his book *Greeks, Romans and Barbarians*. But his interests would soon defy the before mentioned chronological interval in both ways, with the appearance, in 2001, of the masterly *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and Its Peoples, 8000 BC to AD 1500*. This book had inaugurated a new historiographical genre in Cunliffe’s repertoire, a *longue durée* history of the Atlantic façade, reminiscent of Fernand Braudel’s history of the Mediterranean, in which he traces the cultural *continuum* of this area and the role of the Atlantic Ocean as a mediator in this process. This approach is then expanded through a series of interlinked studies, like the similarly lengthy *Europe Between the Oceans: 9000 BC – AD 1000* (2008) and *By Steppe, Dessert and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia* (published in 2015 and focusing on the land connections of Eurasia) or by the more monographic *Britain Begins* (2013) and even through an ancillary study like *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek: The Man Who Discovered Britain* (٢٠٠١). As such, *On the Ocean* comes as a synthesis of this series, based on the (geographical) model exposed in *Europe Between the Oceans* (presenting Europe as an Eurasian peninsula, bordered by two behaviourally distinct water masses) but focusing on the shorelines and its maritime cultures. If in *Facing the Ocean* we could follow “only” the Atlantic façade’s *longue durée* history, now the image is completed with the Mediterranean “cauldron’s” history and their intermingling through Gibraltar.

In the first chapter, *Those in Peril on the Sea*, the author presents a human cognitive perspective regarding the Sea, which pervades through the classical and medieval literary sources. This classical idea is ambivalent. On one side the Sea, in opposition to the land, can be considered a disordered realm which is to be avoided for it brings death, but on the other side the Sea can be rewarding for those who challenge it. Besides material goods, knowledge and reputation would have bolstered the seafarer’s ambitions. In the same chapter we can get a glimpse at another cognitive perspective regarding the sea, embedded this time in the belief system of the prehistoric Atlantic cultures. For them, the never-ending Ocean had cosmological implications.

The second chapter, *The Combat That Is Called Navigation*, consists in a

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more pragmatic approach by the author. The geological and geographical formation of the Mediterranean is responsible for the different currents, winds and types of coastlines, aspects essential for navigation. A similar description is made also for the Atlantic coast. The importance of Gibraltar, as well as the distribution of natural resources are underlined by the author. The chapter finishes with a section dedicated to ancient seafaring techniques and their transmission.

In the third chapter, *Taking to the Sea*, the author looks for the first traces of navigation from the Upper Palaeolithic, then to more tangible evidence from the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers (with the focus on the coastal communities found in modern Portugal and Denmark). The chapter ends with the expansion of the “Neolithic package” from the east and how it reached the Atlantic façade through navigation.

The fourth chapter, *Two Seas, Many Responses* (5300 – 1200 BC) focuses on the history of the western Mediterranean and the Atlantic façade during the Neolithic and Bronze Age. Mainly through archaeological evidences we can envisage an interlinked (by sea) culture (the megalithic graves representing a common elite expression), with regional spheres (like the Nordic or the British arc) and super-regional spheres (especially the Iberian centre, which connected the western Mediterranean to the Atlantic coast). With the appearance of the bronze technology, the shipbuilding techniques evolve and the trade networks expand. This history is not, though, a linear one. Peripheral centres, like the Nordic one are re-incorporated to the main network, established by the Neolithic farmers and, before them, by the Mesolithic foragers.

In the fifth chapter, *The Eastern Mediterranean Cauldron*, 5300 – 1200 BC, we are faced with a better, “politically” documented history. Still, the author firstly focuses on the geographical characteristics. The appearance of the near eastern states invigorates maritime trade networks, the case of Egypt being essential in its need to connect via Cyprus and later Crete to the Levantine coast. This gives way to the appearance of maritime trade cultures like that of the Minoans and the Canaanites. Shipbuilding techniques and trade networks reach a new height.

In the sixth chapter, *Exploring the Ends of The World*, 1200 – 600 BC, we can take a look at the expansion of these near eastern maritime cultures, especially the Phoenicians and later the Greeks, into the Western Mediterranean and Iberian Coast, determined by the system-collapse of 1200 BC. The Bronze Age Atlantic cultures are disrupted by this advance (Iberia and North Africa are incorporated in the Phoenician sphere).

In the next chapter, *Of Ships and Sails: A Technical Interlude*, the author details the better known shipbuilding techniques and vessel types of the first millennium BC, and the adaptations which took place once the Phoenicians got into contact with the Atlantic, and vice versa.

The eight chapter, *Exploring the Outer Ocean*, 600 – 100 BC, focuses on the exploration under Phoenician and, later, Greek seafarers of the outer Ocean and the ever-changing perspective about this Ocean, which pervades through classical sources. The chapter finishes with the Romans becoming, after they defeat the Phoenicians, an Atlantic power.

The ninth chapter, *The Atlantic Community*, 100 BC – AD 500, presents the Roman expansion on the Atlantic coast and their perspective of this different Ocean, as well as the impact of this contact for shipbuilding techniques in these areas (the appearance of Romano-Celtic ships).

The tenth chapter, *An End and a Beginning*, 300 – 800, focuses on the development of the late Roman ships and the changing geopolitics of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, as new forces challenge the Roman dominance (Germanic, Arab expansions). At the end of this chapter we understand that the Mediterranean becomes a conservative environment, as we are prepared to face a new mobility and innovation in the northern European area.

This is very well explained in the next chapter, *The Age of the Northmen*, 780 – 1100, in which Scandinavia becomes the centre of an ever-expanding trade network, which will influence Europe’s development. There are three main reasons for the Viking expansion: the need of land to resettle and the need of acquiring goods in a competitive society, expressed both through trade and raiding. All are done, of course, by the way of water, the Nordic cultures (especially Norwegian) being maritime by nature.

In the twelve chapter, *The New European Order*, 1100 – 1400, we are faced with the prospect of the emerging European states, this leading to a commercial imperative which transcends the boundaries of these states. Adding the facts that Iberia (and Gibraltar) is taken from the Arabs and the Vikings cease their raiding, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic worlds reconnect. Commercial interests (especially Genoese, as well as Venetian and Hanseatic) gets shipbuilding techniques to a new height.

The thirteen chapter, *The Ocean Conquered* 1400 – 1510, focuses especially on the Portuguese, Spanish and English explorations of the Atlantic. They were driven by economic and societal interests, but were aided by a new cognitive perspective of the Ocean, derived from ancient sources and expressed through portolans and maps.

In the last of the chapters, *Reflections on the Ocean*, the author reiterates the principal concepts through which he followed the maritime history of both sides of the European peninsula.

Given the sheer scale of information contained in this book (chronologically from the Mesolithic to the dawn of modern era, covering geographically all the coasts of the European peninsula), one would expect it to be painful to read. But the manner in which Barry Cunliffe manages to arrange it all is remarkable. The first two chapters are introductory (in a literary, respectively in a geographical manner), followed by the core of the book, which presents, mainly through archaeological means, the complex maritime history of the Atlantic and Mediterranean shores. Depending on the historical developments, the author provides specific perspectives. If for the Mesolithic era we are given an overall view of the whole development, for the Neolithic and Bronze Age we are presented with two parallel chapters (one regarding the Atlantic cultures, the other the Mediterranean cultures), hinting to the different developments of these two areas. Starting with the end of the Bronze Age, we follow a Mediterranean perspective (in the footsteps of the Phoenician and later Greek seafarers) that gets into contact

with the Atlantic cultures and influences them. After the late Roman period, the focus shifts to the Atlantic side, the main actors being the Vikings this time. The core of the book ends with another overall view of the connected Mediterranean and Atlantic worlds, which paved the way for the conquering of the Atlantic Ocean. As such, the author follows the more or less separate development of each zone if it is the case, or follows focal points of interconnection between them in other cases. This aspect gives the narrative coherence in the long run. The chapters overlap in their introduction for the same reason. The coherence of the narrative is sustained by following a series of topics too (like the topic of shipbuilding techniques, or by following specific settlement areas which reoccur throughout different periods).

The format of the book is reader-friendly, each big chapter being carefully divided into relevant subchapters. Along the way, beautiful pictures and carefully crafted maps (of shorelines and of distribution of the archaeological material) catch the eye and help to geographically localize the discussion. The lack of footnotes is welcomed, as it clears the text. This fact is well balanced by the existence of a bibliographical guide at the end of the book, appropriate for both the curious everyday reader and the specialized researcher. The additional glossary of nautical terms and the index provide useful tools to navigate through the text.

I conclude by saying that *On the Ocean* is a magnificent book, being carefully crafted and requiring all of Barry Cunliffe's encyclopaedic knowledge. The image portrayed, through multilateral means, offers a coherent narrative that can be followed through different times and spaces, offering both the overall view and the detailed developments. This synthesis on European maritime history, homage through its name to the lost classical works of Posidonius and Pytheas, can be completed for an even bigger view with the anterior book of the same author, *By Steppe, Desert and Ocean*. Barry Cunliffe's effort represents one of the best documented and exhaustive histories of the genre inaugurated by Fernand Braudel, being approachable by the common reader and representing, for the scientific researcher, a broad historical context based on the most recent level of research.

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